

ADVISORY COUNCIL
January 12, 2021 Meeting Minutes

ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT

Patrick Early, Chair
Bill Freeman, Vice Chair
R. Ross Williams
Tim Karns

NRC, DIVISION OF HEARINGS STAFF PRESENT

Sandra Jensen
Dawn Wilson
Billie Franklin

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STAFF PRESENT

Dan Bortner, Executive Office
Chris Smith, Executive Office
Mike Smith, Executive Office
J.B. Brindle, Communications

GUESTS PRESENT

None

Call to Order

Patrick Early, Chair, called to order the regular meeting of the Advisory Council at 10:01 a.m. ET on January 12, 2021. The meeting was conducted virtually using WebEx. Access information for the meeting was included on the agenda that was distributed and posted. With the presence of four members, the Chair observed a quorum.

Early offered opening remarks noting that presently the Advisory Council, which should have seven members, has only has four members appointed. Early noted that he had previously discussed the role of the Advisory Council with Dan Bortner, Director of the Department of Natural Resources (Department). He observed that, in the past, the Advisory Council provided an initial opportunity to consider and receive public input about rules being considered by the Department. Early recognized Bortner's stated interest in utilizing the Advisory Council in this way again and in seeking to have the three vacant member positions filled.

Early also noted that John Davis has retired from his position as a Deputy Director for the Department. In response to Early's inquiry about a replacement for Davis, Bortner explained that interim adjustments have been made that will have the Division of State Parks reporting directly to him, Engineering will be reporting to Mike Smith and all other land holding divisions, as well as the regulatory divisions, will be reporting to Deputy Director Chris Smith.

Bortner explained that there may be some realignment of Department resources in the future to improve organization and efficiencies. He explained his interest in utilizing the Advisory Council and the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) in a way that better correlates with the responsibilities anticipated of each by statute. Bortner recognized that much of the “heavy lifting” should happen before the Advisory Council, versus the NRC’s large public meetings, to allow for some potentially controversial issues to be addressed early.

Election of Officers (Chair and Vice Chair)

Tim Karns moved to slate the officers now standing for the 2021 term, Patrick Early, as Chair, and Bill Freeman, as Vice Chair. Ross Williams seconded the motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion was unanimously carried.

Reports of Deputies Director

Chris Smith, Deputy Director, provided his report. Smith offered that Director Clark retired in July, 2020 after being appointed in 2013. He also noted John Davis’ recent retirement explaining that John had worked for the State for 40 years starting with the Department in 1991 after working for the Department of Transportation. Smith also noted Bob Vollmer’s retirement at 103 years of age after 57 years with the Department. Smith noted that Vollmer actually pre-dated the Department as he was hired by the Department of Conservation, which is the predecessor to the Department.

Smith advised that the legislative session started last week and he observed that COVID has impacted the session. He noted that all of the bills have not been filed yet so there’s not a good view yet, for what will be considered.

Smith reported that Department properties remained open throughout the year despite the challenges in addressing COVID. He added that the state park gate fees were waived for approximately two months to allow people better opportunities to recreate while other activities were restricted. Because of that, the properties experienced significant increases in usage, with approximately 90% campground usage throughout the season. He observed that the Inns were impacted and are not back to full operation, particularly in the event area.

Smith noted that the Divisions of Forestry and State Parks rely heavily upon Department of Correction labor, which has not been available this year, which has created increased workloads for Department Staff.

Smith reported that holiday gift pack sales are at 10,000 plus, which he viewed as evidence that people are finding and re-discovering the value in outdoor recreation.

Smith offered that the Division of Water has been focused on addressing issues related to shoreline erosion along Lake Michigan and recognized the Division of Entomology and Plant Pathology’s role in addressing the “mystery seeds”.

Smith reported that two new State Forests, Mountain Tea in Brown County and Ravinia in Morgan County, came on line in 2020. He also noted the Division of Forestry's "million tree project", through which 250,000 trees are to be planted in each of the next four years.

Smith also recognized that for the sixth time in seven years the Division of Reclamation has won an award from the federal Office of Surface Mining for its Abandoned Mine Land project within Sugar Ridge Fish and Wildlife Area. Smith also discussed the Division of Reclamation's work with the Office of the Attorney General with respect to the bond held by the Department to ensure the State's ability to conduct proper reclamation in light of the bankruptcy of White Stallion Energy.

Smith introduced J.B. Brindle as the Director of Communications. Smith recognized Brindle and the Division of Communication for the effort they put into communicating with experienced, as well as new, users of Department properties throughout this challenging year.

Smith observed that the Division of Fish and Wildlife just concluded deer season, with over 123,000 deer harvested. Smith reported that this is the highest number of deer taken since the 2015-2016 season. He noted, again, the increased interest in outdoor recreation and offered assurance that revenues generated will be reinvested in the programs. He also noted that the Division of Fish and Wildlife was recognized by the Congressional Sportsmen Foundation as its "state agency of the year". He also acknowledged that the NRC recently granted preliminary adoption to a rule proposing the amendment of rules effecting equipment for hunting turkey and deer. Smith also observed the success in responding to the threat upon bald eagles, reporting that the bald eagle populations have rebounded sufficiently to allow the bald eagle to be removed from the endangered species list.

Smith also noted that Terry Coleman has been promoted to the position of Director of State Parks.

Smith also offered an update on the Next Level Trails program. Smith reported that the Division of Outdoor Recreation awarded 17 grants totaling approximately \$24 million, that came with approximately \$12 million in match from the grantees, which is expected to generate approximately 42 miles of trails. Smith reported that Round 2 was put on hold due to COVID related budget constraints.

Bill Freeman inquired about the carbon sequestration bill pending in the House of Representatives.

Smith reported that he hasn't reviewed it in detail but that David Bausman has been discussing it with the author. He stated that upon first review, the bill appears to be positive but noted that the "devil is in the details" and he believed some additional discussion about and work on the bill would be necessary.

Freeman also inquired about the Department's ability to get trees packaged for spring distribution. Smith stated that in light of the lack of labor provided by the Department of

Corrections, an email was sent out seeking volunteers from Department staff and even staff of other agencies. Smith reported that everyone pulled together and the project was completed.

Mike Smith, Deputy Director, offered his report. Smith stated that the Office of Management and Budget and the State Budget Agency will be presenting the 2022-2023 budget to the State Budget Committee on January 13, 2021. Smith observed that all agencies were asked to reduce General Fund budgets by 15%, which meant a reduction of approximately \$7.5 million annually from the Department's budget.

Approval of minutes of meeting held on January 14, 2020

The Chair requested a motion for the approval of the Council's January 14, 2020 meeting minutes.

Tim Karns moved to approve the minutes, as presented. Bill Freeman seconded motion. Upon a voice vote, the motion unanimously carried.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:31 a.m., ET.